

# **OVERCOMING CHALLENGES IN ESTABLISHING A REGIONAL PUBLIC EDUCATION AND OUTREACH PARTNERSHIP**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Over the past twelve years, many Phase I Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) operators have established programs for public outreach. Often these programs have focused on specific municipalities using varying approaches. With the implementation of the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Phase II rules by USEPA, smaller municipalities are faced with the challenge of creating effective public outreach programs. Although Phase II rules provide more comprehensive guidance, Phase II municipalities typically have fewer resources at their disposal.

Phase II rules emphasize the importance of forming partnerships for public outreach and education. These partnerships can provide the benefits of pooled resources, reduced costs, and a more consistent and effective outreach program. While there are clear benefits of forming regional public outreach and education partnerships, many challenges must be overcome to establish an effective and equitable program.

This paper discusses key issue areas that were addressed in the successful establishment of a regional public outreach partnership involving ten municipalities in the metropolitan Phoenix, Arizona area. These include issues related to membership, local perceptions, funding, the decision-making process, and leadership.

## **Introduction**

The USEPA's National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Stormwater Permit Program was introduced to reduce the number of impaired surface water bodies within the United States. When one considers the requirements of the Phase I and Phase II programs, one may simply envision BMPs being put into place to minimize polluted stormwater runoff flowing into our nation's treasured streams and lakes. These water bodies not only serve as a valuable natural resource, but also may enhance quality of life.

When applied to the desert southwest, this vision of the NPDES program is not so easy to grasp. First, very little rainfall is received in desert areas. Secondly, in the desert, the term river is more commonly associated with a dry riverbed than a flowing body of water. These realities play a significant role in influencing public opinion about stormwater pollution.

With these realities in mind, regulated MS4s throughout the Phoenix Metropolitan area recently came together to form a regional public outreach organization. This paper describes how Phase I and Phase II municipalities worked together to change the way stormwater quality concerns are perceived in an area where some view these concerns on the same level as UFO sightings. This paper discusses the methods used, challenges encountered, and lessons learned in forming a stormwater public outreach group in the Phoenix Metropolitan area.

## History

NPDES permit requirements implemented in 1990 brought new connotations to the word “stormwater” in Arizona, as larger municipalities were faced with the challenge of regulating stormwater quality. When speaking of stormwater, in an arid climate that only receives an average rainfall of about six-inches per year (<http://ag.arizona.edu/oals/watershed/highlands/climate.html>), pollution is not the first issue that comes to mind. Nonetheless, Arizona’s Phase I municipalities worked diligently to successfully implement effective stormwater programs. Representatives from these municipalities often shared ideas and information, but their respective NPDES permit applications and programs varied from municipality to municipality. For example, permitted municipalities each developed unique programs to address public outreach, inspections, enforcement, representative rainstorms, and other program requirements.

This individual approach to NPDES issues in Arizona would change in 1997, when Pima County and the cities of Tempe, Tucson, Mesa, and Phoenix petitioned against numeric limitations on water quality standards (Case Name: Defenders of Wildlife V. Browner; Case Number: 98-71080; Date Filed: 09/15/99). The submission of the petition, and its subsequent defense in a lawsuit brought by Defenders of Wildlife, helped these municipalities form strong working relationships and unify their visions. In the late 1990’s, the cities of Glendale and Scottsdale were also issued NPDES permits, and began to interact with representatives from other Phase I communities in Arizona. By this time, Phase I communities had organized themselves to form a fairly cohesive unit, with a unified voice.

In early 2000, the State of Arizona’s Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ) began working toward NPDES Permitting program approval (<http://www.adeq.state.az.us/environ/water/permits/azpdes.html#quest>). This event sparked the interest of other municipalities, many of which would be designated as regulated MS4s under the Phase II NPDES program. Many of the larger municipalities throughout the state worked together as stakeholders in ADEQ’s quest for NPDES. This process resulted in building a working relationship among the Phase I communities and several of the larger Phase II communities.

These events, which helped form the foundation for the NPDES Program in Arizona, played an important role in bringing municipalities together as partners. Relationships were developed, ideas were shared, and assistance was offered. This atmosphere provided a good foundation for the creation of a regional public outreach group. Several communities realized the benefits of working together on a regional level, and they began exploring the idea of a regional public outreach program.

## Forming a Regional Public Outreach Group

The first recommendation in the EPA’s Phase II Rule for developing public education and outreach programs is to form state or regional partnerships (EPA 2000). The EPA Fact Sheet on Public Education and Outreach (*Fact Sheet 2.3, Public Education and Outreach Minimum Control Measure, January 2000, EPA*) suggests that regional programs are more cost-effective since they utilize shared resources and existing education and outreach materials. As will be discussed later, there are additional benefits to regional public outreach groups. These benefits stem from the collective creativity and the variety of experience and interests shared by the group.

The concept of regulated communities in Arizona forming partnerships was not new, but, when public works planners from the City of Scottsdale met with the City of Phoenix’s chief water quality inspector to talk about public education and outreach, a new enthusiasm was generated. This enthusiasm was translated

into action, including the coordination of a meeting among several regional MS4s to discuss developing a cooperative public outreach and education effort.

### ***Identifying Membership***

The first challenge faced in organizing a regional public outreach group was identifying membership. Before the first meeting could be convened, a list of potential group members had to be created. It made the most sense to select municipalities affected by the regulation and located within a common geographical region and influenced by the same television and radio stations. It was also important to consider the communities that intermingle within the region. For example, a person who lives in Mesa may work in Phoenix, and shop in Scottsdale. Someone from Peoria may work in Glendale and watch Cactus League baseball games within the City of Surprise. Maricopa County was generally identified as the region of focus for the public outreach group. The original list of potential members included all known Phase I and Phase II municipalities in the selected region, Maricopa County Flood Control District, Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG), ADEQ, and various municipalities that were potential Phase II candidates. Key contacts for each municipal stormwater program were invited to attend. Once the potential members were identified, it was important that everyone had the opportunity to participate. Meeting announcements were distributed via email, and RSVPs were requested. When a municipality did not respond, a follow up call was made.

### ***Maintaining Focus***

The idea of this first meeting was to identify the level of interest for participation in the group, provide background information about the Public Education and Outreach requirements of the NPDES stormwater program, and discuss the viability of implementation. The inaugural meeting was held in June of 2001. Twelve municipalities participated. This meeting marked the commencement of a public outreach organization for the Phoenix Metropolitan area, now known as STormwater Outreach for Regional Municipalities (STORM). Enthusiasm at the meeting was very encouraging, and many municipalities showed an interest in participating.

Although there was consensus support at the meeting for forming a regional organization, there was no decision regarding where to go from there or immediate follow-up. Consequently, Phase I municipalities forged ahead with their permit reapplications independently, while Phase II communities attended NPDES-related seminars, began to budget, and contracted with consultants to prepare for completing their individual permit applications. Other priorities and lack of follow through from this initial meeting caused a loss of focus. This loss of focus was the second challenge to the establishment of the regional public outreach group. It would be almost another year before a second meeting was held.

## ***Establishing Leadership***

One key to moving forward with the formation of STORM was establishing leadership. At first, several people seemed willing to fill the leadership role. As time passed, however, it became apparent that someone would need to assert him or herself as the leader. This person needed to take the initiative and assume the role of coordinating with the selected municipalities and planning meetings. While the majority of the representatives from the municipalities were willing to participate in the organization, they did not have extra time needed to perform leadership duties such as setting a meeting time, arranging for meeting space, inviting members to attend, and establishing an agenda. A consultant who has represented several Phase I and Phase II communities in the region assumed this role. This leader ensured that the organization was established, interest did not wane, and that the group would move forward.

In May of 2002, a second meeting was held to reinitiate the regional public outreach effort. The goal of this meeting was to reconvene the group and establish a plan for the future. Some of the participants had changed, so this meeting brought new faces and new questions. The meeting was very well attended and the results were encouraging. During this meeting, it became clear that this was the first exposure to NPDES program requirements for some municipalities in attendance. It was necessary, therefore, to provide background information about the requirements of the Phase II Program and the associated responsibilities of the affected municipalities. The meeting also served as forum to identify common goals and outline advantages to the group members. It quickly became apparent that some of the municipalities desired to have a high level of participation, while others wanted to become involved only after the group had been established.

Both the Phase I and Phase II communities shared a desire to make this regional public outreach effort a success. The Phase I municipalities saw an immediate need to begin a regional partnership so they could integrate it into their existing programs, and the Phase II municipalities wanted to capitalize on the experience and resources of the Phase I municipalities. Many were interested in the group's success because there was a feeling that this group could truly have a positive impact on their community, and that those who participated in organizing this group would be part of something great. Another perceived benefit of the group was that it could reduce the public outreach burden on the individual municipalities. The Phase I municipalities with years of public outreach experience played a significant role in guiding the group.

## ***Making Decisions***

As subsequent meetings were held, more issues began to surface. One of the first issues to be tackled was determining the process by which the group would make decisions. Buy-in from the group as a whole was important, but there was always some disagreement among members about what the best decision might be. Consequently, the organization established a policy of majority rule and general consensus. This meant that decisions were narrowed down to the point where a vote could be taken, followed by a poll to ensure that all members could live with the results. This process was tested in the selection of a name and mission statement for the group. The group decided to adopt "STormwater Outreach for Regional Municipalities," or STORM, as the name. The mission statement agreed to was "*STORM promotes regional stormwater public education through outreach.*"

Another major issue addressed was financing the organization. This was a very difficult issue because it involved city budgets, intergovernmental cooperation, financial management, and finding an equitable way to distribute the projected costs of the program. Discussion among regional Phase II municipalities revealed common concerns about acquiring the resources to pay for the new program. Their budgets for the entire NPDES stormwater program ranged from \$10,000 to \$500,000. Most of the Phase I communities had already established budgets for public education and outreach, but there was concern about how much could be allocated to the group.

The City of Phoenix had already made a significant investment in outreach and educational materials. They freely shared all of the information and materials they had developed with other group members. These materials included a storm drain marker design, BMP pamphlets, and a comic book series detailing the adventures of “Storm Drain Dan,” a stormwater quality superhero. Phoenix also volunteered to send electronic copies of their printed materials so that other municipalities could customize them by changing the logos and contact information. While these materials came at no cost, another goal of STORM was to enable member municipalities to capitalize on the buying power of the group, and to share the costs of developing television and radio spots.

Because most budgets for the 2002-2003 Fiscal Year had already been established at the time the group got started, STORM members had some time before the next budget cycle to consider the benefits of participating on the group and determine their levels of commitment. Before the group could publish any materials, they needed to identify funding mechanisms. The following funding ideas were considered.

- Base membership fees on distinct population categories; similar to what is done by the National Association of Flood and Stormwater Management Agencies.
- Assess membership fees on a per capita basis. (i.e., \$0.05 per person within the municipality).
- Establish in-kind contributions in lieu of membership fees.
- Assess a flat membership fee for all members of the group.
- Pay as you go. Develop public education and outreach materials that municipalities can buy individually.
- Provide no funding. Use the group to share resources and ideas.

After much discussion, the group decided that the most equitable funding method was a fee-based approach, set according to each municipality’s population. Table 1 lists the first-year fees for the members of STORM. These fees are subject to change based on the programs the group chooses to implement in the future.

**Table 1.** STORM Population Based Fee Structure

<b>Population</b>	<b>Fee</b>
0 – 25,000	\$1,000
25,001 – 50,000	\$1,500
50,001 – 100,000	\$2,000
100,001 – 250,000	\$2,500
Greater than 250,000	\$5,000

Another issue involved dealing with perceptions by some of the local governments that stormwater pollution prevention is insignificant and a low priority. These perceptions were shared by the public and even some potential members of STORM. When City Managers and Councils do not consider stormwater runoff a high priority, it is unlikely that sufficient funding will be dedicated to stormwater quality programs.

An independent effort was initiated by Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG), an established regional planning organization, to educate and offer assistance to city managers. Another approach to educating decision-makers was for group members to work individually with their municipality's management. This presents an additional opportunity for the group to make an impact. The group discussed these issues and provided recommendations that would assist members in approaching decision-makers.

The group also addressed the issue of public perception. These perceptions will govern the types of outreach activities that each of the municipalities conducts. Group members stressed that the stormwater pollution prevention message had to be tailored to meet the needs of the area. While many areas of the country can use storm drain markers with slogans such as "No dumping... Drains to River," a more appropriate slogan for the Phoenix area would be "No dumping... drains to dry river bed." Therefore, more creative solutions must be presented, such as "Only Rain in the Drain" or "Storm Drains... No Dumping." The general feeling was that the message had to strongly target pollution prevention and have stormwater under tones. A regional group speaking to the public with a common voice and a consistent message has a much better chance of educating the public than inconsistent messages from independent sources.

The municipalities also expressed concern about how the group would be controlled. Members have to be committed to STORM either financially or through in-kind service in order to accomplish the organization's mission. Decisions will be made as a group, but someone has to be responsible for following through. The Flood Control District of Maricopa County (FCDMC) expressed a willingness to be the fiscal agent for the group, and will handle the funding through letter agreements with the member municipalities.

In order to address these concerns, a subcommittee of STORM has researched several models for the management of the funds and coordination of contracts. These models include several existing programs administered by the City of Phoenix, FCDMC, and various non-profit organizations. Based on these models a structure was established for the administration of STORM.

In establishing the organizational model for STORM, the members agreed that a board would be elected which would be responsible for organizing and facilitating the meetings, developing the meeting agendas, maintaining meeting minutes, and managing the group's money. The STORM board now consists of four members, including a chairman, a vice chairman, a secretary, and a fiscal agent. The board members are elected annually, and can serve for an unlimited number of terms.

The contractual agreement among the organizations was also addressed. Two different methods for the administering the contracts were put forth, a formal intergovernmental agreement, and an informal agreement. The members of STORM decided that the informal agreement would be easier and more effective to administer, since it would bypass the need for City Council approval. The informal agreement will be administered through the fiscal agent (FCDMC) who will submit a letter each year to the group's members assessing the fees due.

## **Lessons Learned**

Many challenges have been faced in the establishment of STORM, and many lie ahead. In the process of overcoming these challenges various lessons were learned that might assist others in developing a regional education and public outreach program.

### ***Understanding Needs***

Since the needs of each municipality dictate the direction of the regional education and public outreach group, it is important that these needs be identified. It was interesting to observe that the goal of some of the municipalities was to utilize the efforts of STORM to totally fulfill the public outreach requirements of their permits. Other municipalities only desired a minimal amount of participation, seeing the organization as merely a purchasing entity that would allow them additional buying power. Respecting and understanding these and other group needs lead to a balanced approach in establishing the objectives of the group. Understanding the needs of the group members also helped the group to remain focused on the issues that are most important.

### ***Taking the Initiative and Sustaining the Effort***

A lesson learned from the year-long lag in between the first and second meeting of STORM, was that finding someone to take the initiative in assuming leadership of the group was critical to establishing the organization. Additionally, if the effort is not sustained over time, little will be gained. Leaders and members of the group must be committed to the effort. Success in sustaining the organizational effort for STORM was realized through the following processes.

- Prepare and organize meeting details and agendas. It is important to meet in a central location and have an agenda that catches the attention of potential members.
- Identify and Invite potential members. A key to getting such a strong showing of Phase II municipalities, was getting the larger Phase I municipalities involved.
- Follow up on invitations personally. When a municipality neglected to RSVP, a personal follow up call was made to extend the invitation.
- Make assignments. When the members participate there is a sense of ownership and greater buy-in.
- Sustain the effort for future meetings. This was done by setting a date and time for the next meeting before adjourning.

The process of creating a successful regional public education and outreach organization does not happen over night. It takes careful planning, consistent effort, discipline, and cooperation to build the foundation of an organization that will have a lasting impact. STORM has found success in applying these principles.

## ***Realizing Results***

This stormwater public outreach organization that began as a dream is now thriving. Great momentum has been growing, and though the trail has been rough and the path ahead is long, the results are truly amazing to see. Some of the group's key accomplishments along the way are listed below:

- Existing Resources from Phase I MS4s have been shared with Phase II MS4s
- An Organizational Model, Strategic Plan, and Funding Mechanism have been formally adopted
- A Fiscal Agent has been assigned
- A Governing Board has been elected
- A grant application for \$250,000 in funding has been submitted to EPA on behalf of STORM
- A STORM website is being created
- STORM has been recognized as the cover story in the November/December issue of Stormwater Magazine
- Municipalities are budgeting for participation in the group by July 2003
- A new bond has been forged among participating municipalities

Each step toward these accomplishments was small. But steadily these steps moved STORM down the path to monumental accomplishments. The future of STORM is looking brighter all the time, and the leadership of STORM on regional stormwater education has been significant.

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